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Values, Outrage and the Good Society

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Bad behaviour should be met with a principled response for a good outcome.



BY
INVITATION

By DAVID CHAN
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

A YEAR ago, I wrote in this column my wish that Singapore in 2014 would focus more on shared values and guiding principles.

Shared values are collective convictions of what is important and what ought to be. I highlighted three such values – fairness, integrity and social harmony.

Guiding principles help translate abstract value statements into actions. I suggested three principles – rule of law, accountability and people-centricity.

As 2014 closes, it is timely to examine how these values and principles were expressed, or not, in some local headline events that occurred this year.

Let's look at headline events that generated much public outrage or controversy. These events have obvious negatives. But they also have positives which are less obvious. Understanding these positives and negatives can help people and government better evaluate policy and public actions.

Obnoxious individuals gone viral

AN OBNOXIOUS individual is one who causes intense displeasure and disgust. This year started and ended with two such individuals – notorious British banker Anton Casey and errant Singaporean retailer Jover Chew.

The facts are well known and undisputed in these two cases. Mr Casey caused public outrage with a series of insulting Facebook posts that sneered at “poor people” in Singapore whom he equated with commuters using public transport. Mr Chew caused public outrage with his infamous acts of refunding a customer more than \$1,000 in coins and scamming a Vietnamese tourist who went on his knees to beg for his money back.

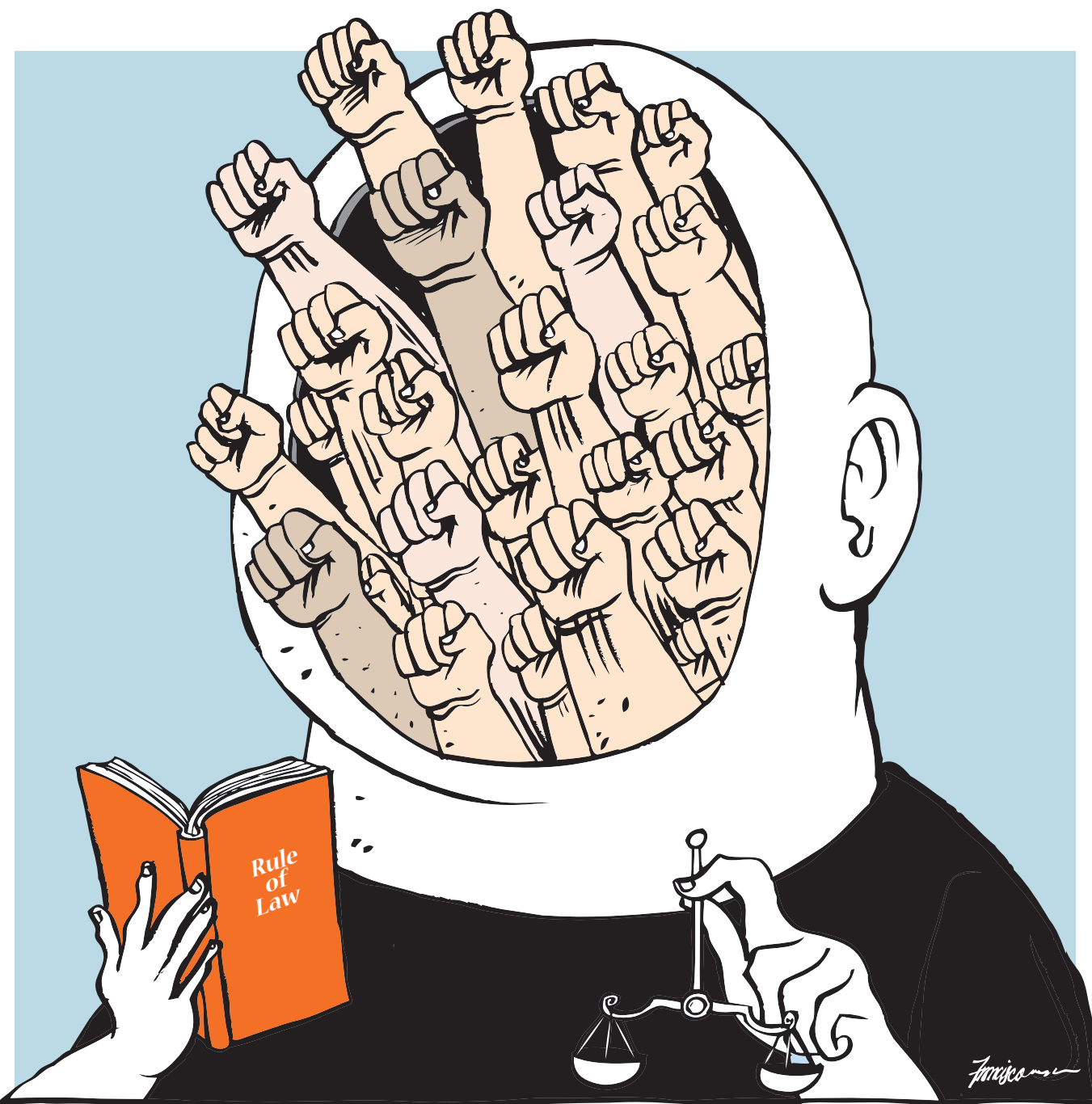
Mr Casey and Mr Chew are obnoxious because their behaviours are deemed unacceptable. They run counter to our shared values of basic respect for people and human dignity. But the specific contexts are also noteworthy.

The Casey case was sensitive because it put the spotlight on local-foreigner tensions. It could also contribute to social divides from issues of income inequality. The underlying value concern was maintaining social harmony.

The Chew case tarnished Singapore's reputation as a good place to shop. It also highlighted the issue of consumer protection and unethical business practices. The underlying value concern was upholding fairness and integrity.

In both cases, even Members of Parliament and ministers felt the need to publicly decry the obnoxious behaviours. But they also urged restraint in the public's reaction. They cautioned against the public taking matters into their own hands to dish out vigilante justice, such as exposing personal data or harassing individuals.

These cautionary remarks are reminders that Singapore adheres



to the guiding principles of rule of law and accountability when pursuing fairness and justice.

Public outrage, people orientation

SOCIAL media makes it easier to propagate stereotypes of specific groups of foreigners. So, in the Casey case, it made sense to remind Singaporeans not to over-generalise and stereotype all expatriates in Singapore. Such reminders are important if the public outrage is deteriorating into a threat to social harmony.

Even when there is strong disagreement, one's reactions should not violate the rule of law and respect for human dignity. But this does not mean one should not speak up strongly.

Words like “xenophobic” or “anti-foreigner” should not be used to describe Singaporeans

who express strong displeasure and disgust when some foreigners exhibit unacceptable behaviour. These words are incorrect representations of the large majority of Singaporeans, including netizens.

It is important to understand what most Singaporeans are saying – and not saying – about foreigners. Using labels like “xenophobia” and “anti-foreigner” to categorise Singaporeans will mask true concerns and issues underlying the angst expressed. It will further divide, not unite.

Consider the social media reaction to Mr Chew, the errant retailer. Even though the large majority of online postings were anonymous, netizens did not side with Mr Chew, who is Singaporean. In fact, there was an outpouring of sympathy for the victim customer – a foreigner. This was evident in both online comments and crowdfunding responses

to help the foreigner victim.

So, one should not be too quick to discredit social media. And one should give credit to social media, and Singaporeans, when it is due.

Singaporeans are discerning and their sense of people-centricity is very much intact. More emphasis should be given to the positive people orientation that accompanies the public outrage.

When values differ

ANOTHER headline event that generated considerable public outrage, or at least public controversy, occurred in the middle of this year. This was the initial decision by the National Library Board (NLB) to remove and destroy three children's titles for not being “pro-family” and not being in line with “community norms”. Apparently, the books portray alternative families and

have homosexual themes.

Passionate public debates erupted after the media reported the books' withdrawal. Value-based arguments were vigorously presented, either in favour of or against the withdrawal.

But many Singaporeans objected to the idea that the books would be destroyed after being withdrawn from circulation. There were numerous public criticisms and a series of protests, one of which involved hundreds of parents and children gathering at the atrium of the National Library building for a read-in.

Eventually, NLB took a revised decision to move the books from the children's section to the adult section instead of destroying them. NLB was also asked by the Minister for Communications and Information to review its process for dealing with books that have controversial themes.

The headline event was unfortunate and unfair for NLB. Psychologically, the negative publicity from this one episode loomed larger than the many years of positive contributions that NLB has made to the reading and research communities in Singapore.

But the issues go beyond the perceptions of NLB. Some saw the overt expressions of differing viewpoints as signs of a maturing democracy in Singapore. Others read the passionate disagreements as evidence of emerging “culture wars” between conservatives and liberals.

Construing differences, constructive disagreements

IT IS understandable that many want to avoid revisiting the NLB case. Such discussions are uncomfortable. They may even threaten good relationships among friends, colleagues and family members when differences in deeply held values are articulated.

But differences in values and viewpoints over many issues will continue to occur. When poorly managed, these differences cause social divides. And it is not restricted to explicitly moral issues such as family structure and gay rights. For example, divides along income lines may occur if the more well-off are asked to pay more taxes to subsidise those who are less well-off.

Public discussion of strong differences is inevitable, given the nature of today's communication and information flow. It is counterproductive to avoid these discussions or mask the differences. Singapore society is better off if people adopt guiding principles that will enable positive attitudes and experiences among the parties concerned.

When people advocate their position or react to differing viewpoints, they should do so within the legal limits for expression of dissent. People should be free to express themselves but they must do so responsibly and be accountable for what they say and do. People should also treat others with the basic dignity and respect they deserve, regardless of the differences in their background, values and beliefs. The golden rule is a good guide – treat others the way you would want to be treated.

When people adopt the rule of law, accountability and people-centricity as principles to guide what they say and do, culture wars become unlikely. Differences will be less threatening. It becomes possible to adapt to value challenges without having to give up what one holds dear.

Disagreements will still occur. But when people adopt principled and adaptive approaches, they are more likely to achieve positive outcomes. Such approaches resolve conflict by building on complementary differences and shared commonalities.

As Singapore celebrates 50 years of nation building next year, obnoxious individuals may not take a holiday and disparate views do not automatically converge. When public outrage and controversies erupt and Singaporeans can see the positives, then Singapore is maturing into a strong society.

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